Content-based Curriculum and the Asia University America Program: How did we get here? What have we learned?

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In early 1988, two faculty members from Asia University in Tokyo came to Western Washington University to discuss the curriculum of a pilot English language and cultural orientation program, known as the Asia University America Program (AUAP). As we began to discuss their goals, purposes, and objectives, it became apparent that they were describing a program that was different not only in scale, but also in curricular goals from any we had previously developed.

Spending several working days together, we looked closely at curricular goals and began to plan specific courses of instruction. In doing so, we felt confident about how to address the goals of:

--Developing students' communicative control of spoken English

--Developing students' reading comprehension skills and

--Orienting students to American life and culture

After all, we had been addressing each of these goals successfully with intensive English program students for a number of years, and we had been working with Asia University students in short, summer conversation and culture programs for almost five years. We were not, however, as certain about how to address two additional goals which Asia University wanted to achieve in the curriculum of their pilot program:

--Familiarizing students with social, political, and cultural developments in American history and

--Introducing students to concepts, issues, and problems related to the human environment.

Clearly, as we considered these last two goals, we were facing an instructional situation which called for the integration of ESL instruction with subject matter or content instruction, but we were not certain how we wanted to approach this integration. The question we faced was simply this: How were we going to enable Asia University students to learn English through the context of American history and environmental science?

As we considered our options, we found ourselves doing a great deal of thinking about how we wanted to combine language and content. We realized that we could approach the integration of language and content from two perspectives: (1) from the perspective of language or (2) from the perspective of content. If we approached it from the perspective of language, we would set up a language skills course which was sensitive to content; in short, the content would provide the subject matter for language learning; students would practice the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) as they participated in activities that focused on content objectives drawn from American history or environmental science. The ESL teacher's primary goal would be to introduce content reading/writing skills, study skills, and terminology -- and to reinforce content-area information. In order to do this, we would need language teachers not

only skilled in methods and techniques of teaching ESL, but also familiar with the content of American history or environmental science.

On the other hand, if we approached the integration of language and content from the perspective of content, we would set up a content course which would somehow have to be sensitive to language. In other words, the teacher's primary goal would be to help students grasp and deal with the content, while the secondary goal would be to develop language and study skills. In order to do this, we would need instructional materials that were clearly content (not skills) based, but also language sensitive.

As we thought about the matter further, we realized that our syllabi really couldn't be determined by language skills -- because our primary focus in these courses was not the development of one or more languages skills. Instead, our syllabi were going to have to be driven by the content itself. In other words, we recognized that we were going to approach our course development from the perspective of content.

We also decided that we wanted to approach these content-based courses using one of two models: either (1) a sheltered course model or (2) a semi-sheltered/adjunct course model. A *sheltered course* would be one with enrollment limited to ESL students -- an instructional situation which would require the lecturer or instructor to significantly alter his presentation and simplify his style. A sheltered course might also be described as a language-sensitive-content course. A *semi-shletered course*

might involve only ESL students, but the lecturer or instructor would not make too many adjustments to that reality. In fact, his presentation and teaching style might not be much different than they would be with American students. There would, of course, be some adjustments, but not major linguistical adjustments. An *adjunct course* would be an ESL support course paired with a regular content course. The adjunct course might, for example, be paired with a lecture-based course, thus providing support for both the understanding of lecture content and the development of language skills.

After giving the matter due consideration, we concluded that we wanted to try out both models during the pilot program. We would approach one of the content courses (American history) as a sheltered course, offering a one-hour/day American history reading and discussion course with different texts for each of the three instructional levels. Accordingly, we found an instructor who had some experience teaching both U.S. history *and* ESL, and we selected American history-related texts at three different proficiency levels.

The other model that we wanted to try was what we called a semi-sheltered/adjunct course approach. This would involve a lecture/discussion format with three lectures per week for the entire group of students in each of the three proficiency levels. Accordingly, we found a tenured faculty member at Western Washington University to deliver a series of lectures on environmental science. We also assigned ESL instructors to attend these lectures,

generate lecture-related instructional materials to their ESL students, and meet with their students in one discussion class for each lecture.

Our experience in the pilot program led us to eventually adopt the semi-shletered/adjunct model for both of our content courses. There were several reasons for doing so. First, many of our students responded positively to the challenge of trying to understand a regular university professor without fear of failing the course if they could not understand anything. They knew their adjunct course would help them understand content and practice skills. In a sense, they could experience the challenge without unrealistic pressure. Second, our entire program benefited by involving tenured university faculty members. We were able to make contact with influential members of the campus community and increase our visibility on campus. We became, in short, more connected to the university and the university more connected to us. Third, we were able to identify two extremely cooperative content-area professors who were willing to work with us on developing instructional materials and who were open-minded about making their lectures accessible to intermediate-range ESL students. Finally, this model brought a balance to our entire curriculum. It enabled us to develop a curriculum which was both functionally practical and academically serious.

The process of developing the content-based curriculum of the Asia University America Program has led to a number of practical conclusions about how to integrate language

and content instruction form the perspective of content. The question we would now like to consider is: what have we learned form this process? As a way to answer this question, we will use the terms *input*, *review*, and *process*. Like most courses, ours involved three main steps: 1) helping students take in information (input); 2) helping them *review* and retain that information; and 3) giving them opportunities to *process*, or explore their understanding of, that information. We will discuss some principles, techniques and activities that we have found useful at each of these three stages.

Step 1: Input.

As we have just discussed, the content-based courses in the AUAP at Western Washington University are based on the semi-sheltered/adjunct model which involves a lecture component and a discussion class component. The lectures are presented by tenured faculty members and the discussion classes are taught by AUAP instructional staff. Most of the input is provided in the lectures and in the textbook. Therefore, our discussion of input will focus on lectures and written texts.

LECTURES. What is necessary in order to be a successful lecturer? The answer is: it depends on who your audience is. In our case, the audience is 19-21 year old Japanese college students. The first thing an American lecturer must be able to do with our students is not be put off by their seemingly passive attitude in the lecture hall. Many of them look bored, some of them even fall asleep, and, in general, they give no visible responses for

the lecturer to cue off of. All of our lecturers have found this very hard to deal with, because they, like most American teachers and lecturers, tend to depend on their audience for cues. They expect students to laugh if something is funny or to ask questions if something is confusing. These responses help lecturers gauge the extent to which they are getting through to their audiences. If students laugh at a joke, they might tell another one; if students ask questions, they will spend extra time on the topics that were asked about; and so on. Without any cues, lecturers are left in a vacuum and feel as if they are talking to themselves. And this is exactly the situation that our lecturers have found themselves in -- especially when they have brought with them, consciously or not, the expectation that lecturing to our students would be the same as lecturing to American students.

One difference between American students and AUAP students, then, is the way they see their roles as students. Another difference is that American students, because of their native familiarity with American culture, possess a great deal of background information that helps them understand the lecturers' explanations. For example, if the lecturer is talking about the late 1960s and uses the phrase "black power," most American students will have at least a general concept of what he means, even of it's nothing more than the image of a raised fist or an Afro hair style. Our students, however, lack the kind of background information, and so any time lecturers introduce a new concept or somewhat unusual word, they have to

explain it. In other words, they have to supply , as they go, any background information necessary to understand the main points they are trying to make. This means that, most of the time at least, they need to consciously monitor their own speech -- much more than they would need to do if they were lecturing to native speakers. In other words, they have to learn how to think like ESL teachers.

Given that there are differences between our students and American students, what qualities do we need a lecturer to have? The most essential quality is that he or she be open to, and interested in, developing a different lecture style than he or she uses with American students. We've learned that it's hard to find lecturers that really have that interest. It's easy to find knowledgeable people, but it's hard to find knowledgeable people who are genuinely interested in trying to express their knowledge in a way that makes it accessible to our students.

What kinds of things *can* lecturers do to make their knowledge accessible to our students? For one thing, they can make the focus of their lectures very clear. Students need to understand what the basic topics to be covered are, and they need to understand when the lecturer is making a transition from one topic to another. Abrupt transitions and tangents tend to confuse our students. In general, visuals help. It seems to be very effective to base a lecture on a transparency of a chart, for example. The facts are easier for the students to understand because they are visible in the chart. The lecturer can explain one aspect of the chart, go off onto related points, and

then keep returning to the chart periodically, to explain other aspects. Writing on the blackboard is also helpful. However, writing *too much* material on the blackboard can be confusing to our students because they put all of their energy into desperately copying the words on the board rather than listening to what the lecturer is saying. Finally, pausing occasionally to review material already covered seems helpful to our students.

WRITTEN INPUT. We have found only a few differences between writing for native speakers and AUAP students. The advice we were given in English 101 seems to fit: compositions should be well organized, main topics should be clear, and paragraph endings should signal shifts in topic. In addition, texts for ESL students (as we said above about lectures) should contain within themselves all of the information needed to fully understand them. This means, for one thing, that explanations of unusual or technical words should be fairly simple, and pronouns should be used sparingly. Repeating the original noun, though repetitious to the ears of native speakers, seems to make it easier for our students to follow what is being said.

Step 2: Review.

One of the primary purposes of the discussion class is to review material from the lectures and the textbook. One way to do this is simply for the discussion teacher to go over the material orally, occasionally writing important words on the blackboard or having students answer questions. Unfortunately, our students don't always

respond well to this approach -- they often tend to lose interest. In fact, we have found it helpful, in the discussion classes, to cast almost everything we do in the form of activities because activities often help generate student interest, and so help create a positive atmosphere in the classroom. Here is a list, with short descriptions, of some of the review activities we have developed:

1) Vocabulary Review

a) Write a list of important words on the blackboard. Divide students into pairs. One student silently chooses one word form the list and says to his/her partner, "Tell me about _____." The partner gives some information. The first person keeps asking for more information until the second person can't give anymore. Then they switch roles.

b) Give each student a slip of paper containing an important word and a brief definition of the word. Have them read the definition over to themselves and become familiar with it. Announce how many words there are all together, and then have them move around the room, asking other students for definitions of their words. They must write each word down. The students giving the definitions should try not to refer to their slips of paper. The first student to get all the words wins. The following dialogue may be used:

A: What's the word for today?
B: _____.
A: What does _____ mean?
B: _____.

c) Pictionary. Divide the class into two teams. Have one member form each team come up to the blackboard. Show them a word. Then they each try to draw pictures of the word, while their teammates try to guess what the word is. The team that correctly guesses first wins.

d) 20 Questions. Split the students into pairs or small groups and write a list of names on the board. One student picks a name, and the other students have to guess it. The number of questions should be limited (20 might be too many), and the questions should be yes/no questions.

e) News Conference. This activity can be used to review a series of events in an important person's life. Divide the students into groups and give each group a sheet containing a list of the events in jumbled order. The group that can put the events in the correct order first wins. Then, using an overhead projector, you might briefly review the

order of the events with the whole class. Then have one student come up to the front of the class and pretend to be reporters and ask questions based on the sheet they have been working with.

f) True/False Dialogues. On the blackboard, write a list of phrases you can use when agreeing or disagreeing with other people. Briefly practice using these phrases. Then write down a list of topics you have been discussing in class. Have each student choose two of the topics and write one sentence about each of them. One of the sentences should be false and the other should be true. Then have students circulate around the room, agreeing or disagreeing with each other's statements.

g) College Bowl. Divide the class into two teams and have each team line up on opposite sides of the room. Ask a review question -- only the first person in line on either team can answer it. The team of the person who answers first gets a point. Then go on to the next person in line and do the same thing. Repeat the process until you run out of time or questions. The team with the most points wins.

Step 3: Process.

The simplest way to get students to think about the information that has been presented in class is to have discussions. The problem here for us has been that the subjects we have been dealing with -- American history and environmental studies -- are, for the most part, distant from our students' experience. For this reason, they often don't have a lot to say about these subjects. One solution is to turn discussions into role play exercises in which students take on the roles of people from American history or advocate certain views on an environmental issue. Another solution is to have students choose topics of interest to them, research their topics, and then give presentations. One direction we have been going in recently with presentations is to have the presenters be the teachers for the day. They take attendance, give lectures, plan and organize activities, prepare overhead

transparencies if necessary, and so on. Students in the audience are given a response sheet on which to give feedback to the presenters. In general, this approach has been quite successful.

In summary, in the five years that we have been running our two content courses, we have learned the following things:

1) Lecturers need to recognize the differences between American students and AUAP students and to be flexible enough to meet the needs of AUAP students.

2) Lectures and texts need to be self-contained: they need to contain within themselves the schema necessary to understand them.

3) Lectures and texts need to be clearly organized around a few key points; transitions from one point to another need to be clear.

4) Reviewing information is best done through the use of activities; these help to hold student interest and create a positive classroom atmosphere.

5) Partly because of the subject matter of our courses, it has often been difficult for our students to hold meaningful discussions (other reasons will be discussed in the conclusion to this paper). As an alternative, we suggest using role plays that are structured as discussion activities; we also suggest having students give presentations on topics of interest to them. In particular, we have had success with having students take on the role of teachers for the day.

Conclusion

Of the three steps in the educative process that we have been discussing, the first two have been easier for us to deal with successfully than the third. There are learnable techniques for presenting information in a way that's easy for students to understand; it is relatively easy to invent activities that help students review the information (and make reviewing it fun). Creating opportunities that foster understanding, however, is never

easy; it is especially problematic when teachers and students come from different cultures, and thus bring to the classroom different expectations about what should happen there.

As Americans teaching Japanese students, we have felt on safe ground when we have presented and reviewed information; we often sense that our students feel very comfortable receiving and remembering information. But when we get to the third step, we often start to stumble. We can't tell the students what their own understanding of the material is, or order them to question it. We must, instead, somehow create situations that encourage them to develop that understanding on their own. But how?

Part of the problem, we suspect, is the difference in expectations that we mentioned above: The idea that studying a subject in school should affect the way students understand the world, that education can -- or should -- deepen one's own individuality, is an idea deeply rooted in American culture. Our students are Japanese, and don't necessarily share this idea. We sometimes suspect that in encouraging them to analyze and question ideas in a classroom setting, we are, in effect, asking them to pretend to be Americans.

By doing so, we are part of their experience of American culture. We often think of ourselves as mediators between our students and American culture -- and think that to some extent we are. But we are also part of American culture ourselves. From this point of view, giving information about American history and environmental

studies isn't our only concern in these courses. We are also trying to accomplish the same goal we are trying to accomplish in our other AUAP courses: to help our students grasp and experience American culture. As classroom teachers, no matter what subject we are teaching, we do that by acting the way American teachers act in the classroom. Experiencing our attitudes toward education, whether or not we ourselves are fully conscious of that attitude, is part of our students' education.